

Clarify Your Message Using Clean Design Elements

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Increasingly, business people rely on desktop publishing. Gone are the days when a male manager would dictate words to a female typist and expect her to turn them into an eye-pleasing document. Also, once complicated documents like brochures and flyers are now easy to create in programs such as Microsoft Publisher, and even MS Word.

But most business people have NOT been trained in graphic design. While such high skills take years to develop, business people still need a basic sense of good design. A good design doesn't just look pretty; it also supports and even enhances your message. So use the following tips to make your message clear and easy for your readers to grasp.

1. Use plenty of white space.

You don't want your manager to skip over your progress report because she doesn't want to wade through dense text to find the important information. Leave lots of white space for easy reading.

Balance between the amount of text and the white space

around it is important. Do print enough content to be credible, however. Leaving too much white space, particularly in combination with a large font, can make your document look childish and makes you look amateur.

2. Remember the Z-pattern.

Readers of languages that are read left to right read in a z-pattern. (Reverse the following information for languages that are read right to left.) Their eyes first focus on the upper left hand corner of a page, so capture their attention there (think about where headlines are placed in newspapers and advertisements).

Next, their eyes travel toward the right, then move down the page diagonally to the lower left hand corner. Good document design will help the readers' eyes travel the page easily and naturally. Finally, they read the last line of the page and end in the lower right corner, and the z-pattern is complete. From there, your design should direct the reader to flip to the next page, if there is one, for the most visually attractive impact.

3. Use graphics to enhance the message, not detract from it.

Regarding the above z-pattern, don't place your graphic elements in the upper right or lower left corners of the page. Use them to direct readers into your document instead. You don't want your readers to look at your photos or graphs without reading the words! Too many graphics and poorly placed graphics will both scatter your readers' attention, taking it away from the text. You'll simply lose them if your graphics detract from your document. When it's so easy to place them properly, why risk it?

4. Create visual partitions with typography.

Combined with white space, graphics and the z-pattern, your choice of font can also help readers scan your document and focus their attention. White space begins to create distinction; you can create even more distinction by adjusting the size and weight of your font. Remember to use bold and italics sparingly, preferably only in the headings and not in your text. You can also vary the actual font or text style you choose for headings. But stick to one serif font (like Times or Courier) and one sans serif font (like Arial or Helvetica). Mixing too many font faces and styles looks garish and amateur.

Today, those who write documents must also design them. Just because you're not a designer doesn't mean you have

an excuse for poorly designed documents. So follow the above advice and create eye-catching designs that make it easier for your reader to understand your message.

Linda Alexander publishes Write to the Point, a FREE biweekly ezine for business people who want to be better writers. Subscribe now!

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